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The Monroe Doctrine

also

Jefferson's Letter to Monroe

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From President Monroe's
Annual Message to Congress
December 2, 1823

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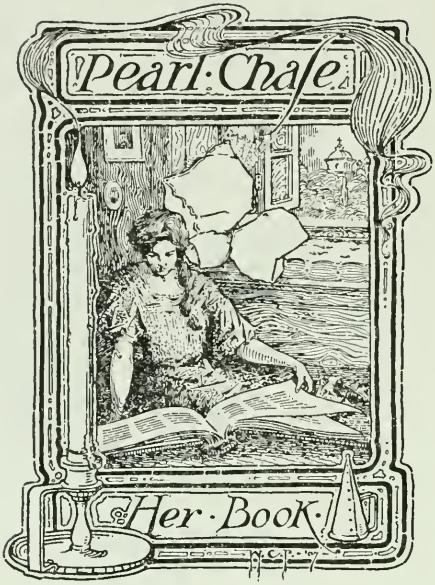
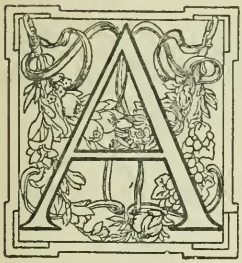

Pearl Chase
Her Book

There is an important subject pertaining to Monroe's administration which is indissolubly associated with his name. It is an announcement of the policy of the United States in respect to foreign interference in the affairs of this continent. This announcement bears the name of the "Monroe Doctrine", as such it is discussed in books on public law and in general histories. It is commonly regarded as an epitome of the principles of the United States with respect to its attitude toward all the American States in their political relations to the rest of the world. The Monroe Doctrine is embodied in Monroe's message to Congress December 2, 1823. The two passages which relate to foreign interference were separated by the introduction of other matters. The parts of the message which have come to be regarded as the "Monroe Doctrine" are as follows:

THE MONROE DOCTRINE



T the proposal of the Russian imperial government, made through the minister of the emperor residing here, a full power and instructions have been transmitted to the minister of the United States at St. Petersburg, to arrange, by amicable negotiation, the respective rights and interests of the two nations on the northwest coast of this continent. A similar proposal has been made by his imperial majesty to the government of Great Britain, which has likewise been acceded to. The government of the United States has been desirous, by this friendly proceeding, of manifesting the great value which they have invariably attached to the friendship of the emperor, and their solicitude to cultivate the best understanding with his government. In the discussions to which this interest has given rise and in the arrangements by which they may terminate, the occasion has been judged proper for asserting, as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers."

II

"It was stated at the commencement of the last session that a great effort was then making in Spain and Portugal to improve the condition of the people of those countries, and that it appeared to be conducted with extraordinary moderation. It need scarcely be remarked that the result has been so far very different from what was then anticipated. Of events in that quarter of the globe, with which we have so much intercourse and from which we derive our origin, we have always been anxious and interested spectators. The citizens of the United States cherish sentiments the most friendly in favor of the liberty and happiness of their fellow-men on that side of the Atlantic. In the wars of the European powers, in matters relating to themselves, we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy so to do. It is only when our rights are invaded or seriously menaced, that we resent injuries or make preparation for our defense. With the movements in this hemisphere we are, of necessity, more immediately connected and by causes which must be obvious to all enlightened and impartial observers. The political system of the allied powers is essentially different in this respect from that of America. This difference proceeds from that which exists in their respective governments. And to the defense of our own, which has been achieved by the loss of so much blood and treasure, and matured by the wisdom of their most enlightened citizens, and under which we have enjoyed unexampled felicity, this whole nation is devoted. We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers, to declare that *we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety.* With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power we have not interfered, and shall not interfere. But with the governments who have declared their independence and maintained it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other man-

ner their destiny, by any European power, in any other light than as *the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.* In the war between those new governments and Spain we declared our neutrality at the time of their recognition, and to this we have adhered and shall continue to adhere, provided no change shall occur which, in the judgment of the competent authorities of this government, shall make a corresponding change on the part of the United States indispensable to their security.

"The late events in Spain and Portugal show that Europe is still unsettled. Of this important fact no stronger proof can be adduced than that the allied powers should have thought it proper, on a principle satisfactory to themselves, to have interposed by force in the internal concerns of Spain. To what extent such interposition may be carried on the same principle, is a question to which all independent powers, whose governments differ from theirs, are interested; even those most remote, and surely none more so than the United States. Our policy in regard to Europe, which was adopted at an early stage of the wars which have so long agitated that quarter of the globe, nevertheless remains the same, which is, not to interfere in the internal concerns of any of its powers; to consider the government *de facto* as the legitimate government for us; to cultivate friendly relations with it, and to preserve those relations by a frank, firm, and manly policy; meeting, in all instances, the just claims of every power; submitting to injuries from none. But in regard to these continents, circumstances are eminently and conspicuously different. It is impossible that the allied powers should extend their political system to any portion of either continent without endangering our peace and happiness; nor can any one believe that our southern brethren, if left to themselves, would adopt it of their own accord. It is equally impossible, therefore, that we should behold such interposition, in any form, with indifference. If we look to the comparative strength and resources of Spain and those new governments, and their distance from each other, it must be obvious that she can never subdue them. It is still the true policy of the United States to leave the parties to themselves, in hope that other powers will pursue the same course."

It is probable that Monroe had little conception of the lasting effect which his message was to produce in his country. He spoke with authority after consultation with his cabinet and with the advice of the best minds of his time.

A careful examination of the writings of earlier statesmen of the Republic will illustrate the growth of the idea embodied in the "Monroe Doctrine".

Thomas Jefferson in his letter to Monroe on October 26, 1823 bears out the fact that it was not Monroe's idea alone, but the consensus of opinion of many of the great minds of Monroe's time.

JEFFERSON'S LETTER TO MONROE

HE question presented by the letters you have sent me is the most momentous which has ever been offered to my contemplation since that of independence. That made us a nation, this sets our compass and points the course which we are to steer through the ocean of time opening on us. And never could we embark on it under circumstances more auspicious. Our first and fundamental maxim should be, never to entangle ourselves in the broils of Europe. Our second, never to suffer Europe to intermeddle with cis-Atlantic affairs. America, North and South, has a set of interests distinct from those of Europe, and peculiarly her own. She should therefore have a system of her own, separate and apart from that of Europe. While the last is laboring to become the domicile of despotism, our endeavor should surely be, to make our hemisphere that of freedom. One nation, most of all, could disturb us in this pursuit; she now offers to lead, aid, and accompany us in it. By acceding to her proposition, we detach her from the band of despots, bring her mighty weight into the scale of free government, and emancipate a continent at one stroke which might otherwise linger long in doubt and difficulty. Great Britian is the nation which can do us the most harm of any one, or all, on earth; and with her on our side we need not fear the whole world. With her then we should the most sedulously cherish

a cordial friendship; and nothing would tend more to knit our affections than to be fighting once more, side by side, in the same cause. Not that I would purchase even her amity at the price of taking part in her wars. But the war in which the present proposition might engage us, should that be its consequence, is not her war, but ours. It's object is to introduce and to establish the American system, of keeping out of our land all foreign powers, of never permitting those of Europe to intermeddle with the affairs of our nations. It is to maintain our own principle, not to depart from it. And if, to facilitate this, we can effect a division in the body of the European powers, and draw over to our side it's most powerful member, surely we should do it. But I am clearly of Mr. Canning's opinion that it will prevent, instead of provoking war. With Great Britain withdrawn from their scale and shifted into that of our two continents. All Europe combined would not undertake such a war, for how would they propose to get at either enemy without superior fleets? Nor is the occasion to be slighted which this proposition offers of declaring our Protest against the atrocious violations of the rights of nations, by the interference of any one in the internal affairs of another so flagitiously begun by Bonaparte, and now continued by the equally lawless alliance, calling itself Holy.

But we have first to ask ourselves a question. Do we wish to acquire to our own confederacy any one or more of the Spanish provinces? I candidly confess that I have ever looked on Cuba as the most interesting addition which could ever be made to our system of states. The control which, with Florida point, this island would give us over the Gulf of Mexico, and the countries, and the isthmus bordering on it, as well as all those whose waters flow into it, would fill up the measure of our political wellbeing. Yet, as I am sensible that this can never be obtained, even with her own consent, but by war; and it's independence, which is our second interest, (and especially it's independence of England) can be secured without it, I have no hesitation in abandoning my first wish to future chances, and accepting it's independence with peace, and the

friendship of England, rather than it's association at the expense of war and her enmity.

I could honestly therefore join in the declaration proposed that we aim not at the acquisition of any of those possessions, that we will not stand in the way of any amicable arrangement between them and the mother country, but that we will oppose with all our means, the forcible interposition of any other power, as auxiliary, stipendiary, or under any other form or pretext and most especially their transfer to any power by conquest, cession, or acquisition in any other way. I should think it therefore advisable that the executive should encourage the British government to a continuance in the dispositions expressed in these letters, by an assurance of his concurrence with them as far as his authority goes, and that as it may lead to war, the declaration of which requires an act of Congress, the case shall be laid before them for consideration at their first meeting, and under the reasonable aspect in which it is seen by himself.

I have been so long weaned from political subjects, and have so long ceased to take any interest in them, that I am sensible I am not qualified to offer opinions on them worthy of any attention. But the question now proposed involves consequences so lasting, and effects so decisive of our future destinies, as to rekindle all the interest I have heretofore felt on such occasions, and to induce me to the hazard of opinions, which will prove only my wish to contribute still my might towards anything which may be useful to our country, and praying you to accept it at only what it is worth, I add the assurance of my constant and affectionate friendship and respect.

Thomas Jefferson

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